

Joe Briggs

»The view of nature portrayed in the poems ›Pike‹ and ›The Jaguar‹ by Ted Hughes«

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The view of nature shown in these two poems is a cruel one. Hughes uses carnivorous animal as his subjects and uses emotive language and descriptions.

In »The Jaguar« the first two verses are used to describe the zoo in which the animal resides. He slowly builds up to the actual Jaguar by describing more the docile animals around and creating the atmosphere of almost unsettling stillness. He emphasises this disturbing aspect of the zoo with similes such as »parrots shriek as if they were on fire« which even though it is only talking about the cries of the birds could have another meaning. Hughes doesn't just talk about harmless animals in this way. He talks about sleeping tigers and lions, animals usually thought of as fierce so that when the Jaguar is introduced it seems even more brutal.

The Jaguar is introduced by describing the way the visitors flock towards its cage to see this graceful and deadly animal mesmerised by its stare and by a morbid fascination with death. The first full line in which the jaguar is actually talked about is the last line of the third verse (over half-way through the poem). This could represent some hesitation to talk about such a menacing animal but as soon as the jaguar comes in to the poem, it is immediately recognisable as the dominant feature in the poem. »Through the prison darkness after the drills of his eyes« is the first definite picture that is portrayed of the jaguar. In this one line the disturbing undercurrent of the previous two and a half verses is brought to a head so that anyone who didn't notice it before now has it staring in their face. This idea of eyes that bore into your soul probing for your deepest darkest fears in the almost obsessive way of a child searching for chocolate eggs on an Easter morning.

The first line of the next verse is »On a short fierce fuse«. This one line describes the Jaguar's temper. How he could snap at any moment. How, without bars to restrain him, he could tear the throats out of the chattering children and camera-wielding tourists that

surround him and leave them as cold, lifeless, inanimate lumps of flesh lying on the sun-warmed concrete path with haemoglobin seeping softly from the mangled mess of veins and tissue that used to be their necks.

The next and final verse depicts the Jaguar's image of freedom («More than to visionary his cell»). The actual image in his head is never fully portrayed instead focusing on the general picture of freedom to move and hunt without the restrictions of his Perspex prison. The poet prefers to let the reader imagine the Jaguar in its natural habitat, the jungles of Central and South America. An animal, which emanates such terrifying energy behind bars in its wilderness. The picture of being in a rainforest, being stalked by this immensely powerful creature, camouflaged and barely visible. Running away and stumbling through the dense rainforest like some kind of tropical Blair Witch Project. This ! is the image, which is conjured up in your mind with these words.

The last line is »Over the cage floor the horizons come«. This is referring back to the Jaguar's dream of freedom but this line is saying that the jaguar will probably never visit the land of his ancestors. It comes to him in his mind's eye. The last line is really saying that physically the cage is the boundary but on the spiritual plane, it is only the beginning.

The Pike in contrast to the Jaguar has no build up to the appearance of the animal. »Pike, three inches long, perfect« is the first line. This line could be taken as a gruesome reference to the way babies are seen as faultless miniature versions of adults. This pike is so small as well and could be seen as just as beautiful as a comparison to its parents as a newborn infant is to its mother and father. The start of the next line reinforces this »pike in all parts«. This harks back to the comparison between a child and the fish. It is a contrast between the pureness of the evil and viciousness that lives inside its head and the pureness and unspoiled innocence of the infant child.

Another line worth noting is »Killers from the egg.« This quote signifies the killer instinct of the fish. Just like some people have a natural flair for athletics or horse riding. The pike's one true gift is for death and destruction.

»A hundred feet long in their world« means that they are the kings of the river. Ruling over the minnows and sticklebacks like a giant dictator ruling with a rod of iron instilling fear into his subjects so they dare not revolt. Patrolling the reeds, searching for unwary

and slow smaller fish who do not notice their impending death until it's too late because for these lesser river-dwellers if a pike singles them out as his next meal then it's equivalent to being invited to a tea party by the Grim Reaper!

The poet then goes on to talk about how the fish will even turn to cannibalism to fill the cavernous stomachs. He relates an anecdote of how he kept three small pikes in an aquarium and how they were slowly whittled down to one survivor with the other two inside him. A sort of cannibalistic version of Big Brother. Then, maybe to silence doubters who think the fish was driven to cannibalism by its habitat, he speaks about a similar case in the wild in which he came across two pikes »One jammed past its gills down the others gullet.« This is an extremely disturbing and unsettling image. The titanic struggles of two fish locked in mortal combat. Both fighting for the same life. In the end one finally manages to slay the other but just as! curiosity killed the cat then greed killed the pike. As the victor is triumphantly attempts to swallow his victim comes the terrifying realisation that he has bitten off more than he can chew and chokes to death deprived of oxygen by the food he fought so hard to kill.

The rest of the poem describes the poets attempt to catch a particularly large and old pike. »Pike too immense to stir.« This poem is a more personal one than the Jaguar with the poet describing his own innate fear of such a creature. »That past nightfall I dared not cast.« The poet describes the tranquillity and quiet only broken by the splashes of his line being cast.

The disturbing picture of an immense and old pike ascending slowly towards you with an evil glint in its eyes and a wicked grin. This image is put at the end of the poem so that is imprinted indelibly in your brain.

The view of nature shown by Hughes in these two poems is a brutal one. He uses predatory animals as his subjects instead of cute and fluffy ones. These poems are to remind us that nature is not always our friend no matter how much we try to help it by cutting pollution. Though the actual carnivores depicted last line of the poem is »That rose towards me slowly, watching«. This line paints a in this poem are fictional, many of their species that are very much alive.

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